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WITHIN WALLS – THE FICTIONAL AUDIENCE OF PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING

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1. Introduction

Let me begin with what could be a controversial statement to some: professional wrestling is the most successful form of live theater performance in the world. Multiple times a week, the world-wide industry leader WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) draws crowds in the thousands, and often the melodrama of wrestling can fill even the largest stadiums. Meanwhile the Japanese promotion NJPW (New Japan Pro Wrestling) has become so popular that it routinely runs shows for English language audiences in America, Great Britain, and in Australia. Whereas WWE and NJPW have weekly television shows and also stream their contents via video-on-demand services to international viewing audiences, the smaller local independent wrestling promotions are also thriving. Also, recently the upstart company All Elite Wrestling has acquired a national cable television deal in the United States, becoming a viable alternative in mainstream professional wrestling to WWE. Indeed, wrestling is at an all-time high¹, and it is no surprise. It offers an immersive live experience and includes its audience like no other form of performance. As a matter of fact, wrestling does not have a choice of including its audience, the audience is included organically, as I shall argue in this paper².

Veijo Hietala calls professional wrestling “the apex of post-modern media sports”³. For him televised sport has evolved into something that encompasses “fake sports” such as wrestling. Hietala states that professional wrestling turns upside down the fraudulent ideology of legitimate sports, the rules, and the sportsmanship that are continuously broken in the name of competition. Indeed, wrestling turns cheating into a spectacle: referees are often violently attacked, hairs are pulled, groins are kicked, and illegal weapons such as metal folding chairs are swung. This is often the case with traditionally American good vs. evil wrestling battles that follow a three act formula: first the hero is proved to be a superior wrestler and athlete, then the villain realizes this and cheats to get the advantage, and finally the hero either prevails and wins or loses after a courageous fight against the odds.

Hietala's analysis of wrestling is an analysis of a sport, but most existing literature regards wrestling as a theatrical performance.⁴ It is hard to draw a line between the two as wrestling is predetermined and scripted but at the same time it clings to the notion that it is a sport by utilizing conventional sports production aspects such as instant replays and sports commentary as narration. That is what makes wrestling hard to pin down as a genre of entertainment. Even though professional wrestling may be marketed as sport in its largest and most important medium, television, it is not regarded as sport by devout sports fans. It does not escape its "fakeness" by being post-modern as much as Veijo Hietala might claim. It is not embraced by people who crave the competitive aspect of sports, those who live vicariously through their hometown teams, or those who just need it to be "real" for it to make sense.

The conventions of spectator sports used in professional wrestling however activate the wrestling audience in a way that no other form of fiction does. Professional wrestling does have its roots in legitimate combat sports, but today the wrestling audience understands what they are in fact witnessing is a "fake sport" that exists solely in the fictional world of wrestling. Indeed, a fictional spectator sport requires a fictional spectator and thus I shall argue that the wrestling audience constitutes a fictional audience.

In this article I will attempt to give an explanation on the fictional world of professional wrestling by referencing Kendall Walton's *Mimesis as Make-Believe*⁵. Further, I will put forth the notion that the professional wrestling audience is an entity inside said fictional world. I believe that this gives the professional wrestling audience power and the ability to become at times even a radical element inside the product they are consuming.

2. What is a fictional world?

In J. M. Barrie's play *Peter Pan* (1904) there is a scene where Peter turns to the audience and asks them to clap their hands if they believe in fairies in order to save the dying Tinkerbell. Presumably every single time the audience would then clap, and this would cue the actor playing Tinkerbell to wake up. This, according to Susanne Langer⁶, is "disregard" of psychical distance and to seek audience participation in this way is to deny that drama is art. Whether this loss of distance is relevant in arguing if a play can be appreciated as an aesthetic object is up for debate, but it does raise an interesting dilemma about what can constitute a fictional world.

Imagining fictional truths is what makes fictional worlds⁷. As children play games of make-believe, they include fictional truths into the real world. This is accomplished through what Kendall Walton calls "props". For example, if a child proposes to another that "the floor is lava" and the two begin to climb on furniture to avoid getting burned, the floor becomes a prop that generates a fictional truth. The floor is a prop merely because the children explicitly make

it so. By stating that the floor is lava and acting accordingly apprehensive to walk on it, they create a fictional world where it is a fictional truth that the floor is lava. Perhaps the children's mother is in the kitchen cooking and standing on the same floor. She is not standing in lava because she is an entity outside said fictional world (until of course the children decide to include the parent in the fictional world they are imagining).

Walton's special definition of the "representational arts" is that they are fiction. According to Walton, performances such as theater are props specifically made for the purposes of being used in imagining fictional truths. These truths are implied through conventions of the given genre. For example, it is automatically implied that during a stage production of *Peter Pan*, what happens on stage is a prop for imagining fictional truths, such as that Wendy Darling is a 12-year-old girl who lives in Bloomsbury, London. If a production of *Peter Pan* would break out on a train platform during rush hour, it would be unclear to anyone unfamiliar with the play or anyone who would not be cued in to the performance by theatrical conventions that what is happening is a prop for imagining the fictional world of *Peter Pan*.

So, what exactly happened with the case of Tinkerbell? The audience was first separate from the fictional world of the play but for a brief moment the audience was merely engaged with it. When most likely in every staging of the play Tinkerbell wakes up, the audience is once again relegated to watching the play from the outside. Peter and Wendy do not fly back to London in front of an audience of people as the fictional world of *Peter Pan* in no way encompasses an audience that could have any power within it. In theater the fourth wall can be broken time to time, but the conventions of theater always rebuild it and the audience is left outside.

3. Professional wrestling as fiction

The genre of entertainment called professional wrestling portrays the fictional sport of professional wrestling. Therefore, the sport of professional wrestling happens exclusively inside a fictional world and a professional wrestling entertainment product is the prop that allows one to imagine said world. This fictional world is in fact quite uniform, as different professional wrestling products reference each other regularly. Especially as the industry leader WWE is referenced by independent promotions constantly as being the "big leagues" in the sport of wrestling. One could even go as far as to say that all professional wrestling shares a fictional world as it is the convention to regard it as such.

Professional wrestlers portray characters, but they are not commensurate to actors on stage. For the most part, wrestlers only play one character for the duration of their careers and often adopt that character in all public relations. For instance, in WWE Joseph Anoa'i portrays the fictional character of Roman Reigns but in all wrestling related discourse the person is

always referred to as Roman Reigns and not Joseph Anoa'i. One could compare this to a musician having a stage name, but a musician is not performing as a part of a fictional world. In essence, Joseph Anoa'i has become Roman Reigns and Roman Reigns is very much like Joseph Anoa'i. At the end of the day, wrestlers are amalgamations of themselves and their characters.

In the fictional sport of professional wrestling the wrestlers fight for money, revenge, glory, respect, and most importantly championships. Championships in professional wrestling are, of course, not won in legitimate sporting contests but are used as fictional story engines. A championship is thus given to the character who is focused on and is currently being portrayed as a winner. The performer who holds a championship title is in a prominent role, often meaning that portraying a fictional champion generally corresponds to more money, prestige, and respect among peers. When, for instance, Roman Reigns' character wins a championship title, the character is a champion inside a fictional world, but the performer also holds the accolade of "being" a champion rather than just "portraying" a champion. As mentioned above, wrestlers are regarded as amalgamations of the performer and the character, so the audience is cued to recognize the championship not only as a fictional accolade but as an actual real-world reward given to the performer. This mentality seeps into the fictional world where the audience members legitimately want their favorite performers to portray winners, effectively making the championship a non-fiction entity inside a fictional world.

All the aforementioned aspects of the fictional world of professional wrestling are conventions of the genre that has its roots in legitimate combat sports. For instance, wrestling television programs do not have opening or closing credits like other fictional programming during which the wrestlers' or writers' names could be revealed. Credits sequences would in a way create a psychical distance between the audience and the fictional world, a distance which according to Susanne Langer is imperative for drama to be art. It is not the convention to create such distance in wrestling. Professional wrestling is also staged and filmed for television very much like a sports program: it features instant replays of the more spectacular moments, sports commentary as story narration, and other aspects of sports production. This cues the audience to regard it as sport even though the audience is well aware of the fact that it is not a legitimate one. The conventions of the genre, or rather the lack of traditional conventions of fiction, create a confusing reality where a new spectator can find it difficult to relate to professional wrestling. It appears too fictional to be a sport and too much like a sport to be fiction.

Be that as it may, wrestling has its audience that seems to embrace these conventions. Whereas theater holds a fourth wall that separates the audience from the fictional world, a fictional sport such as wrestling has a fourth wall that holds the audience in. When this is established, it is of course imperative for the audience to perform inside the fictional world and play its part.

4. The fictional audience of professional wrestling

So, it stands to reason that even a fictional spectator sport needs an audience. Admittedly, it would make very little logical sense for a fictional professional wrestler to compete in front of a crowd that is under the assumption that his or her fights are predetermined, choreographed, and fake. In other words: the professional wrestling audience must be a fictional entity. It follows that a single audience member at a live wrestling show is simultaneously spectating a fictional performance and a part of said performance. The audience, in essence, is performing whether they want to or not. Thus, I argue that professional wrestling is a form of performance which has historically and organically engulfed its audience as a fundamental element of the fictional world it presents to them.

This performative aspect of the audience's experience has grown as a byproduct of the age of television. WWE produces live events that are then filmed and distributed as television content. From the point of view of the television audience, the live crowd is an element of the show. Most, if not all, audience members are aware that they are an element of the show. This creates a unique situation where the professional wrestling audience is participating inside a fictional world and thus, in Waltonian terms, inside a representational work of art.

When a fan buys a ticket to a televised WWE show, they know that in addition to getting a show, they get to be a part of it. As WWE wants its television product to be as exciting as possible, the live crowd is encouraged to perform, to make noise, and to convey a sense of frenzy to the audience at home. Whereas in the past wrestling television programs were aimed to sell the audience on the live experience, today WWE has been able to monetize the television audience directly: the live, physically present audience is an element of production rather than its means. The paying customer has a job as a background actor, and in a way, WWE has a history of exploiting its audience in order to make good television.

Televised professional wrestling indeed demands an active audience. A wrestling story for the most part has a protagonist (in wrestling parlance "the babyface" or more simply "the face") and an antagonist (in wrestling parlance "the heel"). The traditional dynamic of audience participation in professional wrestling is such in which the face is cheered, and the heel is booed. The audience, to this day, more often than not performs in a way that conveys the sense that the face has an implied home field advantage. This is the standard circumstance in the fictional world of professional wrestling, as it fits the central story of the hero overcoming the odds in front of a supportive audience. It is also mostly a cathartic experience to members of the audience when they feel as if they have helped the morally upstanding face in defeating the villainous heel. It should be noted, that a traditional face versus heel dynamic is in no way the only story that can be told in wrestling, on which I shall elaborate at the end of this paper.

The live audience reactions create a vital aural backdrop for the televised matches. As the audience mostly acts in a rather predictable way, in which the wrestlers portraying faces are cheered and the wrestlers portraying heels are booed, it creates an unambiguous television product as well. However, whether an audience follows this exact dynamic or not (and many times it does not) it is always obliged to at least make noise. As any wrestling promoter would say: there is nothing worse than a silent audience. This is true to the point that WWE has even taken up the practice of adding audio of audience reactions to taped shows in order to convey the desired atmosphere in the building.

As mentioned previously, professional wrestlers portray fictional characters, but these characters are amalgamations of themselves and the characters created for them. For instance, the fans for the most part recognize a wrestler's journey from the independent scene (the minor leagues) to the WWE (the big leagues). A wrestler is thus able to garner recognition among the most zealous fans as a kind of starving artist by toiling on the independents and honing one's craft before eventually earning the limelight. The Internet has made it fairly easy to follow the career of an independent wrestler and knowledge of the independent scene has become a new kind of cultural currency. At the same time, for a few decades now WWE has had the practice of also training their own wrestlers from the very start of their career. This allows them to create characters and mold performers to fit their needs. However, these characters do not have the reputation of the independent stars that at least in the eyes of some fans have created their own fame. This forms an interesting dichotomy between WWE created company guys and the "Internet darlings". This dynamic seeps into the fictional world that professional wrestling presents through its audience.

This creates the potential for a performer to debut on WWE television without any credibility in the eyes of the "smart fans"⁸, the most zealous fans that are consumed by wrestling minutia. These fans could be called wrestling geeks but they do have some power as taste makers. One wrestler that had no prior wrestling experience before WWE was Roman Reigns, whose character was introduced as a part of a heel group called The Shield by the side of two former independent stars: Dean Ambrose and Seth Rollins. The Shield was a successful act but after the group disbanded it became abundantly clear that Reigns was the wrestler WWE higher ups saw as the biggest star and the franchise character of the company going forward. Very soon the "smart fans" realized this and the backlash Reigns got was unprecedented. Reigns has primarily portrayed a face for his entire solo career since 2014, but the audiences have not accepted him as such. First started by a few "smart crowds" at bigger shows, the majority of all live crowds started to boo Reigns. Be that as it may, this has not stopped WWE from promoting Reigns as one of their most prominent heroes. WWE production also started to mute booing crowds and to cut negative crowd reactions in post-production as well as confiscating anti-Reigns signs brought into shows by fans.

The reception that Reigns gets from live audiences goes against the fictional truths of WWE where Reigns is a hero that should be looked up to, not booed. In the case of Reigns though, WWE has started to manipulate the part of the fictional world created by the crowd reactions for him. From some crowds Reigns has even garnered the dreaded chant “You can’t wrestle!” which is essentially a loud and clear indictment on Reigns’ ability to entertain his audience and not his characters’ ability to wrestle and win matches in the fictional world of WWE. For all intents and purposes Reigns is a hard worker and a talented wrestler, but the narrative for his character was not created in the fictional world but instead in the fact that the “smart crowds” have not accepted him. To them Reigns represents industry created pop music that lacks true artistic merit earned toiling on the independents. Essentially, it became trendy and cool to hate Roman Reigns.

On the other hand, when a wrestler gains a following among the taste makers, the wrestler can essentially arrive in WWE already a star in the eyes of the fans and the credibility a wrestler gleans on the independent circuit rarely ever dissipates. For instance, when Kevin Owens debuted on WWE after performing on the indies for over a decade, he was already a star in the eyes of the fans, garnering an enormous ovation from the live crowd. Before that night was over though, Owens had turned heel and become a vile, opportunistic character who figuratively stabbed his friend in the back in order to further his own career. To this day, Owens is greeted by live audiences by mostly cheers instead of boos even though the character has very little redeeming qualities. This can be accounted to the audience’s appreciation of Owens’ charisma and ability to the extent that it does not matter whether Owens portrays a heel. In addition to this, Owens’ independent past is a factor, effectively making him a former starving artist and thus a genuine rag to riches story. It is hard to boo an underdog. Thus, Kevin Owens’ character is a pure villain that gets cheered by audiences, and this often creates a rather surreal situation in the fictional world of WWE.

Only recently has Roman Reigns gained some traction as a face in the eyes of the fans. This happened more or less because of a real-life tragedy befalling Joseph Anoa’i as he was diagnosed with leukemia in the fall of 2018. The fans were of course sympathetic of his struggle and as he made his announcement on live television the crowd was respectable and unified in cheers and applause. Remarkably, after only 6 months Reigns made his return to television and the fans had not forgotten. Reigns has since been almost universally cheered. It took a strange and tragic turn of events for Reigns to turn the corner, and it shows that a mere fictional story of struggle and perseverance is not enough for the wrestling audience anymore.

5. Conclusions

It is safe to say that professional wrestling presents a special kind of fictional world where fictional characters cannot be separated from the performers and where championships are not mere story engines but also career achievements. It is also such a world that has historically and organically engulfed its audience as a fundamental element of itself. The clapping of the audience of Peter Pan might have woken up Tinkerbell, but a theater audience does not have power inside the fictional world they are consuming. I argue that the professional wrestling audience has such power as it is in fact a fictional entity. It also exercises its power regularly, whether or not its motives could be criticized as being at times egotistic and vague.

For the French philosopher Jacques Rancière⁹, being a spectator is inherently a bad thing. Firstly, viewing for Rancière is the opposite of knowing as the spectator is held in a place of ignorance from the production of the image. Secondly, viewing is the opposite of acting as the spectator remains passive. The viewer is therefore robbed of both the capacity to know and the power to act. Rancière believes that theater is inherently evil as it prohibits knowledge and action. Theater is the third term standing in between the artist and the viewer blocking the formation of a true community, a community of active power. This community is one that does not tolerate theatrical mediation. However, for Rancière theater is potentially an exemplary community form. It encapsulates the ideal of a living community that occupies the same place and time as opposed to forms that utilize the distance of representation. More so than other forms, theater in a way has the potential to bridge the gap between the artist and the audience.

Obviously, one can easily imagine a play where the fourth wall is continuously broken. Peter Pan does this and improvisational theater takes audience suggestions. However, the fourth wall is broken if and only if the artist allows it. The artist merely gifts the audience a taste of power and only by the artist's terms. True knowledge is not transferred, and participation is only temporary and trivial. Theater indeed does not allow a situation where the relationship between the artist and the audience is flipped upside down. Rancière states that what is needed then is a "new theater": a theater where those in attendance are able glean knowledge as opposed to being merely exposed to images, but also a theater where those in attendance are able to act as opposed to being passive voyeurs. This would essentially be a theater without spectators but with a knowing, acting community audience. The "new theater" would be the ultimate realm of what he calls "the unpredictable subject".

According to Roland Barthes wrestling is a spectacle¹⁰. However, it seems that wrestling does not leave its viewers as passive and disinterested voyeurs. As we have learned, wrestling has organically and historically engulfed its audience as a part of its fictional world. Wrestling is unique theater because it presents a fictional sport. Actual sports do not have fourth walls, but

wrestling can be said to have a fourth wall that traps the audience in. Outside the walls the audience has no agency, but when invited in the audience can act. In theater the audience is robbed of its abilities to act and know, but wrestling is built upon the notion that the artwork – the third term – is diminished to the point where the audience has power to act, and even become a radical element inside the fictional world. In Waltonian terms the wrestling audience is acting inside a representational work of art.

I do not claim that professional wrestling is the exemplary form of culture that already realizes the potentials of the Rancièrian unpredictable subject. This is partly because wrestling is often extremely violent. It is not the goal of this paper to build an apology for aestheticized violence, but I feel that it is imperative to bring this up if the aesthetic values of wrestling are to be defended. Existing literature on wrestling depicts the art as paint by numbers, a violent soap opera that lacks subtlety and that offers very little seedbed for analysis beyond wrestling being a theatrical spectacle of excess.¹¹ Wrestling is often celebrated as a simple morality play but it seldom is investigated as other than curiosity. Perhaps this is because of its violent nature. Violence is deplorable in real life, so what aesthetic value is there in a form that depicts a world this ugly?¹²

It might come as a shock to someone with only cursory knowledge of wrestling, that the genre is not inherently violent. One could even argue that it is less brutal than most legitimate professional combat sports such as mixed martial arts or boxing. Two performers can put on an enthralling match within the traditional rules of wrestling where neither resort to any overtly cruel tactics. A match can tell the story of sibling rivalry, student pitted against the teacher, or veteran versus rookie. A match does not have to have an obvious villain and an obvious hero. A wrestling match is not necessarily a simple morality play but instead it can dwell in the shades of grey. By this I mean that wrestling has potentials of storytelling that are yet to be investigated properly.¹³

Wrestling matches by themselves are also abundant with meaning that is often left unexplored in literature on the subject. Matches consist of wrestling maneuvers that are rich with lore. While some moves have evolved from rarity to common place, some are almost sacred and to be used only in the most extreme of situations. Wrestling characters overcome their weaknesses and build their strengths in the span of their careers. Rivalries can build without even a word spoken between two performers, just with exchanged wins and losses, championship opportunities awarded to one and withheld from the other. These elements of the genre are analyzed profusely by wrestling fans online but overlooked when discussing wrestling as a relevant form of culture. It is of course tempting to explain wrestling in simplified terms and compare it to forms such as theater, but indeed there are components that make wrestling very unique.

That is all to say that there is potential in wrestling: both in terms of a field of research but also as a petri dish of audience agency. Perhaps professional wrestling offers a recipe of

participation through the fictional integration of its audience that eventually will help create a form that realizes some of Rancière's utopian goals of the "new theater". Until then, wrestling fans are quite happy to be the sole partakers in this unique process of participation.

¹ For instance, just recently WWE's stock price reported record highs after the company received a new lucrative television deal. <<http://money.cnn.com/2018/05/17/news/companies/wwe-raw-smackdown-tv/index.html>>

² This paper is based on my master's thesis "You can't wrestle!" – Professional Wrestling as Participatory Fiction (University of Helsinki, 2018).

³ Hietala, Veijo 2003. *Painii myyttien kanssa – urheilu modernissa ja postmodernissa mediakulttuurissa*. Lähikuva I/2003.

⁴ See e.g. Chow B., Laine E., Warden C. (ed.) 2017. *Performance and professional wrestling*. Oxford UK, Routledge.

⁵ Walton, Kendall L. 1990. *Mimesis as Make-believe*. Cambridge MA USA/London UK, Harvard University Press.

⁶ Langer, Susanne 1953. *Feeling and form*. New York City NY USA, Charles Scribner's Sons. Page 319.

⁷ It is not relevant to this article to discuss the possibility of fictional worlds. One should merely take the stance that there are in fact such things as fictional worlds that have the characteristic of not existing. Walton for instance does not give fictional worlds further ontological statuses.

⁸ Originally, "smart fan" meant a fan that was aware of the fact that wrestling matches had fixed outcomes. Now though it refers to more dedicated wrestling fans as opposed to ones that are casual television viewers.

⁹ Rancière, Jacques 2011. *The Emancipated Spectator*. London UK, Verso

¹⁰ Barthes, Roland 2005 [1957]. *The World of Wrestling*. In Sammond, Nicholas (ed.) 2005. *Steel chair to the head* (pp. 23-32). Durham NC USA, Duke University Press.

¹¹ Barthes called wrestling a spectacle of excess. Wrestling was also explained in a simplified manner by Henry Jenkins III in "Never trust a snake": *WWF as a masculine melodrama*. (In Sammond, Nicholas (ed.) 2005. *Steel chair to the head* (pp. 33-66)). Durham NC USA, Duke University Press.)

¹² A very good examination on the subject of aestheticized violence is Henry Bacon's *Väkivallan lumo* (2010. Helsinki, Like Kustannus Oy).

¹³ While finalizing this paper I came across Lisa Jones' article *All caught up in the kayfabe: understanding and appreciating pro-wrestling* (*Journal of the philosophy of sport*. 2019, vol. 46, no. 2, 276–291). Jones makes several same points as my 2018 published thesis and is also to my knowledge the only other professional wrestling related work that cites Walton's theory of fictional worlds.